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### Abstract

Relates Williams’s Romantic Theology to the precursors of Dante and Beatrice, and to the Christian doctrines of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation.

### Additional Keywords

Incarnation and theology of romantic love; The Trinity and Theology of Romantic Love; Williams, Charles—Views on romantic love; Williams, Charles. Religion and Love in Dante: The Theology of Romantic Love—Sources

# Charles Williams and his Theology of Romantic Love:

## A Dantean Interpretation of the Christian Doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity

Nancy Enright

In his novels, poetry, drama, and theological works, Charles Williams sought to express the truths of Christianity in fresh and creative ways, reaching into the heart of his beliefs and stretching his vision as poet and author. A lover of love and, as T. S. Eliot calls him, "a mystic . . . of love" (*All Hallows Eve*, by Williams; Introduction, xvii), Williams saw in the romantic experience of falling in love a shadow of theological truth, of Divine Love itself. Indeed, he saw more than a shadow: he saw it as a way, not *the* Way, but a preparatory path for the soul to take on its journey to salvation and also at the same time part of the Way as a soul begins to open up to God by experiencing His love in another.

Where that love can take the one who embarks on what Williams calls "the Romantic Way" is the subject of his Romantic Theology, and his analysis of Dante explores where this avenue of the Affirmative Way, the "via positiva" of medieval theology, can lead. He saw in Dante's depiction of his love for Beatrice the great potential of love leading to heaven while the rejection or perversion of love leads to hell. Yet the underlying note is always grace, a belief in the all-encompassing love of God, from which all our lesser loves derive and which set the stage for forgiveness of every deficiency in love in the death of Christ on the cross.

If properly pursued, the Romantic Way can lead lovers to a state of "incarnate love" on earth so that their very union is a microcosm of the City of God. The Theology of Romantic Love is Charles Williams' attempt to explore this experience of love in light of Christian theology. Central to his Romantic theology are the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation.

First, the doctrine of the Trinity, Whose Divine Members exist in co-inherent love, is the basis for Williams' belief in the importance of co-inherence in the life of believers and in the romantic experience. Williams uses the term co-inherence, a word taken from patristic times and referring to the mutual indwelling of the Holy Trinity, to mean the voluntary bearing of one another's burdens and a "living in the other," which should be the normal life of the church on earth.

Second, the Incarnation of Christ is the root of his belief that all people, if they allow themselves to be transformed by grace, can be images of God, lesser ones no doubt but

images all the same, an imaging for which men and women were intended from their creation. According to the Theology of Romantic Love, the lover sees the beloved precisely as this image of God, and as a vehicle of grace, she (or he) leads the lover into the co-inherence of God's love. Like Dante, Williams saw all of life as capable of being significant of the Glory of eternity.

In Williams' two studies of Dante, *The Figure of Beatrice and Religion and Love in Dante*, and his theological work *He Came Down from Heaven*, he explains Romantic Theology in great detail. When one "falls in love," Williams believes, one sees a glimpse of the heavenly perfection potentially present in every human being and eternally present in God. This is why Dante is neither blasphemous nor profane when he associates Beatrice with Christ in the *Vita* by comparing her following of Giovanna with Christ's following of the Precursor, John the Baptist. He says, "It is a very high mystical identity" (*Religion and Love*, 8). The result of this experience is an immediate conversion into a meaningful though temporary state of effortless "caritas" or charity. As Dante describes it, if anyone were to ask him a question, his answer would be only "Love" (*Vita*, quoted by Williams in *Religion and Love*, 9). However, this sense of all-encompassing charity merely provides a glimpse of what the lover may eventually become. It is up to him (or her) to explore the meaning of this experience by looking beyond it to the theological truths to which it is pointing, as Dante does in the *Commedia*. By doing so the lover can move from a taste of salvation to the full experience of it.

The exploration may begin with the lover examining retrospectively exactly what his "Beatrician experience" has entailed. Essentially, according to Williams, he has seen a glimpse of the unfallen splendor of humanity. The concept that men and women are made to reflect the Divine Image in a profound way runs throughout Biblical history from creation ("In the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" Gen. 1:27) through the end of the world ("We know when He appears we shall be like Him because we shall see Him just as He is" 1 John 3:2b). The Beatrician moment is a hint of that glory—both paradoxical and eschatological. The sense of eternity lovers so often experience is, says Williams, a reality.

The vision of the beloved is a momentary healing of the breach between flesh and spirit, which resulted from the

fall and whose ultimate expression is death. "The union of flesh and spirit, visible in [the beloved] is credible everywhere; indeed that vision, which so much poetry has desired to describe, is understood as more profound and more natural than the dichotomy of experience or any expression which has separated them" (Williams, *He Came Down From Heaven*, 89). In Coleridge's sense of the word "symbol," the beloved is a symbol, not an allegory, of the Kingdom, for "symbol has its own being as well as being a part of some other greater being, and representing the whole of that greater being in its own part" (*Reason and Beauty*, 54-55). Mary McDermott Shideler very ably describes this distinction between symbol and allegory or, as she puts it, "image" and allegory in her book *The Theology of Romantic Love: A Study in the Writings of Charles Williams* (12-17 and elsewhere).

However, the fact that the glory is truly revealed in the beloved in no way denies the reality of her own very real imperfection. Williams detested inaccuracy and saw it as inimical to love. The beloved's faults are therefore seen and acknowledged, but the vision is no less significant for that. In the novels *Shadows of Ecstasy* and *The Place of the Lion*, the lovers, Philip in the former and Anthony in the latter, acknowledge the faults of the ones they love but see beyond those faults to the significance of the vision revealed in them. On the contrary, "[The beloved] has a double nature and [the lover] can have double sight" (*He Came Down from Heaven*, 107).

Of course, not all romantic experiences will fit this pattern, a fact of which Williams was fully aware. However, he believes the "Beatrician experience" as he describes it to be universal enough to warrant serious study. As profound as the experience is, Williams believes it occurs in the lives of a large number of ordinary people. Nevertheless, the analysis of the experience in terms of theological meaning is uncommon and most valuable (*Beatrice*, 16). The lover must not simply see the heavenly perfection revealed in this other being and do nothing more than enjoy it for his own. He must know and understand what the revelation means. As it points him to Christ and an understanding of His incarnate love and His death and resurrection, the lover must move toward Christ in faith. Only this step will allow him to *become* the love that he has seen. "To be in love must be followed by the will to *be* love; to be love to the beloved, to be love to all, to be in fact (as Christ said) perfect" (*He Came Down from Heaven*, 112). It can be achieved only by grace through faith. Yet the glorious process is not without pain.

Dante describes his initial adult encounter with Beatrice as opening up in him "an agony of choice" (*Beatrice*, 25). Indeed, the lover on the Romantic Way is faced with a perplexing number of options. While some of the choices are between evil and good (the choice, for example, between accepting or rejecting the vision revealed in this experience), others are between various "goods" — such as the choice between marriage and celibacy.

Since marriage is the path chosen by most people and in it "every issue arises which confronts the romantic" (Shideler, *Theology*, 204-205), it is the natural setting for living out the supernatural promise of the Beatrician experience, even though Dante himself was denied or did not choose this avenue of exploration with Beatrice. Because the Beatrician revelation is by its very nature a physical revelation of God's love and glory, sexual love is a most appropriate means for exploring the vision, within the context of the marital relationship. The root of this potentiality is the Incarnation, which Shideler says "opened the way for men and women to know love by means of their bodies, and not primarily by means of their own bodies but by each other" (*Theology*, 207).

However, not all lovers are called to marriage. One of the reasons Williams gives for using the term Romantic in the phrase "Romantic Theology" is "that it includes other loves beside the sexual" (*Beatrice*, 14; quoted also by Shideler, *Theology*, 30). Williams views chastity as a positive, not a negative, virtue, a *saving up* of something rather than a giving up. For him, chastity is "something vibrant and purposeful, adventurous and colourful, a quality of identity opposed to all muddle and self-indulgent incoherence" (Cavaliero, "The Way of Affirmation: a Study of the Writings of Charles Williams," 23), just as he saw marital love as a healthy corrective to all unholy and false asceticism and unnecessary renunciation.

The ultimate possible end of this approach in whatever form — celibate or married — can be salvation. However, Williams never implies that the Romantic Way or romantic love can save anyone. It is simply an instrument, among other instruments, used by God to lead people to Himself; He alone can save. We see this in the *Commedia*, where Beatrice, as an image of God's love but not God, must point beyond herself to God, the Source of all love, grace, and salvation. As personified Love reminds Dante in the *Vita*, the end of the path must be beyond the merely personal enjoyment of a particular object of romantic love: "Ego tamquam centrum circuli, cui simili modo se habent circumferentiae partes; to autem non sic"; that is, "I am the center of a circle to which all parts on the circumference are in a similar relation; but you are not so" (*Vita*, XII, 42; quoted by Williams, *Beatrice*, 24; Dante echoing St. Bernard of Clairvaux). No matter which path or option the lover chooses, the Theology of Romantic Love describes the movement from the circumference to the center of the circle, where love indeed casts out all fear, even "in the days when Beatrice does not smile" (*Religion and Love*, 12).

As personified Love reminds the young Dante, at the center of the circle where Love is, one is "unaffected by such things on the circumference as salutation and responses" (*He Came Down from Heaven*, 105). It is here that forgiveness plays its essential role in the love relationship. "To refuse to forgive is to prefer a spectre, and to prefer a spectre is to remain forever lost" (Williams, *The Forgiveness of Sins*, 95). However, this early withdrawal of the salutation is only a foretaste of the greater withdrawal to come.

Beyond the early vicissitudes of love, in one sense or another, Beatrice herself must die. In Dante's case, her death was literal, but even were Beatrice to live the initial Glory is not permanent: "The living sense of Perfection does seem to be withdrawn. Time and habit veil it perhaps" (*Religion and Love*, 12-13).

Yet, moving toward the center of the circle where Love is, at the moment of the Beatrician withdrawal, the lover can realize that "love does not belong to lovers, but they to it" (*He Came Down from Heaven*, 111). In the agony of "the great why" after the withdrawal of the Beatrician splendor, the Theology of Romantic Love "refers [the lover] to the Christian analysis of the nature of the world and of man" (Shideler, *Theology*, 45). In a sense the vision must be withdrawn because "revelation of God though it be, Godhead is not to be imposed upon the flesh; rather the manhood is to be lifted into God.... The disappearance of the glory forces man's intellect and will into action" (Shideler, *Theology*, 116). Williams likens the Beatrician revelation, or Beatrice herself if you will, to the Incarnation of Christ in this matter of the withdrawal also:

It is eternal but is not everlastingly visible anymore than the earthly life of Christ . . . Its authority remains unimpaired . . . The appearance of the glory is temporary; the authority of the glory towards pure love is everlasting; the quality of the glory is eternal; such as the heavens have in Christ. *Heaven*, 110.

Underlying the comparison is the "real identity," mentioned earlier, which Williams sees between human romantic love and Divine Love. Therefore, the Beatrician experience, though apparently withdrawn, can never be eternally lost except by the will, exercised evilly, of the lover; that is, by his deliberate sin. Also the vision, by its very nature, extends beyond itself to include eventually all love, divine and universal. "The superstitions make heaven and earth in the form of the beloved" whereas "the theology declares that the beloved is the *first preparatory form of heaven and earth* (Lewis, *Arthurian Torso*, 117). According to Williams, for the lover on the true Romantic Way, the withdrawal can be faced and even found useful if he realizes that love is not simply for his own gratification but that "love is reality" (Shideler, *Theology*, 29). Transforming the pain of withdrawal into a deeper knowledge of love, the lover continues to conform himself to the glory towards which the original Beatrician moment pointed, a glory to be fully experienced only in heaven though it can be tasted here on earth.

In her role in the *Commedia*, Beatrice reveals the mutuality of love possible in the Romantic Way. As Williams points out, while "The *New Life* had been about the love of Dante for Beatrice, . . . the *Comedy* is about the love of Beatrice for Dante" (Williams, *Religion and Love*, 16). In her paradisaic teaching, she delights in his growing spiritual maturity:

If in the fire of love I flame thus hot upon thee  
... marvel not;  
This comes of perfect sight, with power endued

To apprehend, and foot by foot to move  
Deeper into the apprehended good;  
Full well I see thine intellect give off  
Splendours already of the eternal light.

Sayers, trans., *Canto V*, 1-9

In perfect co-inherence, she begins to enjoy the image of Incarnate Love in the one who began his ascent into Glory by perceiving the Incarnate Love in her.

While Beatrice, speaking in heaven and functioning as both redeemed woman and symbol of God's love, conveys God's grace far more perfectly than any earthly person could, Williams believed the Divine Love she expresses can indeed be experienced on earth, albeit imperfectly:

In certain states of romantic love the Holy Spirit has deigned to reveal, as it were, the Christ-hood of two individuals each to other. He is himself the 'Conciliator' and it is there that the 'conciliation' and the Reconciliation begins. But this is only possible because of the Incarnation.

Williams, *Descent of the Dove*, 131.

The lovers exist in the light and love of Christ, in the co-inherence of the Kingdom. As they convey His love to each other, they are connected to Eden and the New Jerusalem. Williams says,

The beloved (male or female) is seen in the light of a Paradisaic knowledge and experience of good. Christ exists in the soul, in joy, in terror, in a miracle of newness. *Ecce, omnia nova facio*. He who is the mystical child of the lovers sustains and supports them. They are the children of their child.

*Heaven*, 102

Thus, their romantic union is a little City of God on earth, a microcosm of the Heavenly Kingdom.

It is in heaven itself that the complete fulfillment of the Romantic Way occurs. In heaven the fullness of potential seen in the Beatrician revelation of Incarnation and co-inherence is experienced. In the Heaven of the Sun, Dante says he has so grown to be "God's lover" that "needs must Beatrix' self admit / Eclipse, and I became oblivious of her" (Sayers, trans., *Canto X*, 58-59). Yet, as Williams points out, "She is so delighted at this that she laughs at the heavenly infidelity" (*Religion and Love*, 36). And neither Beatrice nor any other saint loses her or his own individuality or importance. "This also is Thou; neither is this Thou." The personal note is sounded till the end. About to gaze at the Glory of the Divine Center of the heavenly Rose, "the end of yearning" (*Canto XXXIII*, 47), Dante smiles his thanks to Beatrice. Then both look away from each other and toward the Divine Center.

There in the co-inherent life of the Holy Trinity the image of man appears in the Second Circle. "Our image" seen there in the very heart of God Himself makes Dante, even the wise and redeemed Dante, strive with wonder "how to fit / the image to the sphere" (Sayers, trans., *Canto XXXIII*, 136-137). It is there that we see the doctrinal roots — Trinity and Incarnation — of Romantic Theology as depicted by Dante, Williams' acknowledged "master" of the Way.

Can one human being bear the Glory of God to another? Williams says yes — because the first and great Incarnation allows for all our lesser imaging and because that great and eternal co-inherence of the Trinity is the pattern for all our lesser co-inherences. As Beatrice's eyes reflect the two-natured Griffin, "Romantic Love is seen to mirror the Humanity and Deity of the Redeemer" (Williams, 106). This divine and human experience is the goal and method of Williams' *Theology of Romantic Love*. ☞

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## Three Artistic Versions of

'The Death of Glorfindel' (continued from page 20)  
scene in Quenya. The over-all effect of the piece is that of a page from an illuminated Elvish manuscript. For those not conversant with the tengwar or Quenya, a transcription of the panel in the English alphabet with translation is provided. (Pat himself translated the English of BoLT into Quenya. —SB)

Sí Laurefindil ar i Valarauko kostaner tanya aikalesse or i lie. Laurefindilo orme hortane i Malkarauke tildello tildenna, i kallo varna ho uruile latta ar angarakka laurea rembenen. Sí palpanéro onno erekassa, sí aupelektane lattaranko ölesse. San i Malarauko quanta kaurenne kampe Laurefindilenna i nastane ve leuko rinke, nan er tüvöiro róma, ar i Valkarauke mápe so. San Laurefindilo má hyarya tüde sikil i amba nastandéro onno súma lerien, ar i ulundó urvao ramne naikenen ar nallante aikalello, mápala oharo lokse laurea nu karma; ar yúyo lantier yúvonna. Yé! Lantalto láma haltane ten i ambor ar quante Sornesifreó yúve.

Now Glorfindel and the Balrog quarrelled upon that peak above the people. The Wrath of Glorfindel sent the Balrog Flying from point to point, the hero protected from fiery lash and iron claw by golden mail. Now he battered the creature's iron helm, now hewed away its whip-arm at the elbow. Then the Balrog, filled with fear, leaped towards Glorfindel, who stung like the dart of a snake, but he only found a shoulder, and the Balrog seized him. Then Glorfindel's left hand found a dagger, which he trust upward to pierce the creature's bosom, and the fiery monster roared in pain and fell backwards from the peak, seizing the warrior's golden hair beneath the helm; and both fell into the abyss. Lo! The echo of their fall leaped through the hills and filled the abyss of Thorn Sir.

(The Variant Quenya forms for "Balrog" were coined by Tolkien himself, used here as synonyms for variety's sake.)

Paula Di Sante: This version of the "Death of Glorfindel" reflects my interest in depicting physical and emotional aftermath. In other words, I like to show what happens after everything happens. The description of Glorfindel's battle with the Balrog in *The Silmarillion* is quite brief — a mere two paragraphs that are very slim on specifics. So it was a creative challenge to provide visual detail that is not described in the text. I see Glorfindel as a "sacrificial savior" figure, and so took my inspiration from the Deposition of the Cross paintings of Peter Paul Rubens and Jacopo Pontormo. These paintings, however, were not so much compositional influence as they were emotional ones. Along with Glorfindel, the other characters portrayed here are Tuor, Idril, the young Eärendil, an unnamed elf of Gondolin, and the tail and talons of Thorondor. ☞

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